EASY CHAIR

Dodge the Draft!

By James Marcus

Ever since the last draft was ended, in 1973, a small but devoted chorus of pundits, legislators, and retired military men have been stumping for its return. These are not wild-eyed boosters of the New American Century, itching to occupy every square inch of the Middle East and beyond. No, we're talking about moderates like the *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank, who recently argued that mandatory service could help fix the dysfunctional U.S. Congress. Or the journalist Thomas E. Ricks, who said the all-volunteer force (AVF) "has made it all too easy for our nation to go to war." Or Representative Charles B. Rangel of New York, who last year brought the Universal National Service Act to the House floor for the fifth time in a decade.

None of these men is arguing that a draft would improve the quality of the fighting force, and their proposals haven't been endorsed by the military. The appeal, ultimately, isn't to battlefield necessity but to a kind of social engineering. Conscription, in their view, would rebuild our spindly national character, whose muscle tone has melted away since the end of the Vietnam War. It would bridge the economic, regional, and racial gaps in a sorely divided nation. It would restore a sense of sacrifice and meanwhile stock the U.S. Congress with the sort of sagacious veterans who would never, ever shut down the entire government in a fit of pique.[1]

The pro-draft pundits have also seized on an appealing paradox: conscription as an antiwar measure. The idea is that veterans in the legislative branch will not only run the country with greater discipline but also be sufficiently sobered by their experience to avoid military adventurism in the first place. Add to that the prospect of their children—and everybody else's—swelling the ranks for our next ground campaign, and you have the democratic equivalent of a mass hostage situation. Barring a Martian invasion or a crack Chinese expeditionary force wading ashore at La Jolla, we might never go to war again.

Andrew J. Bacevich, a historian (and contributor to this magazine) who served in both Vietnam and the Persian Gulf before retiring from the Army as a colonel, in 1992, calls this the "skin-in-the-game argument." The profound disconnect between the armed forces and the civilian establishment "allows the military to be abused, or used recklessly," he told me. "If you and I had our sons or daughters serving and likely to be sent into harm's way, we would exercise greater caution. And we'd be writing letters to our congressmen saying, 'You damn well think twice before sending my boy to fight in the Syrian civil war.' There's something to that argument." Indeed, there is something to all of them—which doesn't change the fact that few Americans would greet a renewed draft with open arms. On the contrary: press-ganging the nation's youth into the armed forces has frequently met with resistance, and sometimes with the sort of explosive unrest that makes the urban uprisings of the Sixties look like pep rallies.

The Revolutionary War was waged by local militias and a volunteer army, and despite George Washington's frazzled requests for more troops, the Continental Congress had no intention of wrecking the fragile American state by imposing a national draft. The next time the issue arose, during the War of 1812, a fuming Daniel Webster questioned the government's right to "take children from their parents, and compel them to fight the battles of any war." (Webster was particularly opposed to the invasion of what was then, for one brief shining moment, the Evil Empire: Canada.)

[1] *It is true that Congress now has the lowest proportion of veterans since the Second World War: only 19 percent have served, compared with a high of 77 percent in 1977. But that year, just as the fraction of vets hit its peak, Congress still shut down the government—not once, but three times.*

Not until the Civil War did America roll out its first national draft. The Confederacy instituted conscription more than a year before the Union—a decision at odds with its purported struggle against tyrannical federalism—but the South was short of men and understandably wary of asking its large population of slaves to fight for, you know, slavery. The Union followed suit with the Enrollment Act of 1863, which allowed potential recruits to buy their way out of service for $300.

In spite of this provision—or more likely because of it, since that sizable sum was out of reach for most—the draft touched off some of the most ferocious rioting in U.S. history. There were violent protests in Boston, Newark, Hartford, Albany. The worst, however, were in New York City, where one observer reported an endless procession of "men and women and even little children armed with brickbats, stones, pokers, shovels and tongs, coal-scuttles, and even tin pans and bits of iron." The mob destroyed draft offices, churches, homes, railroad tracks, and telegraph lines. They marched on the headquarters of the *New York Times*—where the sight of three Gatling guns manned by the newspaper's staff led to a temporary retreat—and tried to burn the mayor's residence to the ground before six regiments of federal soldiers arrived to restore the peace.

World War I was different. Sold to the public as a struggle for civilization itself, it roused little such resistance. Having learned from the Civil War riots, the government offered no buyout option for the wealthy—all able men would serve, regardless of social station. (George Creel, Woodrow Wilson's P.R. wizard, also anticipated some of the current arguments for the draft by promising that it would revitalize "the heart, liver, and kidneys of America.") As for World War II, it, too, was presented as a Manichaean clash between good and evil—and, once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, a defensive conflict to boot. The *Times* could keep its Gatling guns in storage.

With Vietnam, however, the insurrectionary days of 1863 seemed to be upon us again. Here was a war increasingly resented by the civilian population. About 210,000 Americans were charged with evading the Vietnam-era draft—a small number, you might argue, given the 2.7 million who actually saw combat during that period. But by the early Seventies, the conflict was inflaming regional, racial, and class divisions across the country. And resistance had begun to creep into the military as well, where it took the form of foot-dragging, insubordination, and ultimately a small epidemic of soldiers fragging their commanding officers. By the time Defense Secretary Melvin Laird announced the end of conscription, in 1973, there was not a peep of protest from the armed forces, who remained spooked by the memory of this slow-motion mutiny for a generation or more. They endorsed the AVF and never looked back, confident they could raise enough volunteers, especially for post–Cold War police actions that would require a smaller footprint and, with a restive public back home, a rapid exit.

Fort Hamilton, whose garrison helped squelch Manhattan's draft riots during the Civil War, is located at the southern edge of Brooklyn: its vintage artillery pieces are trained defiantly on the piers of the Verrazano–Narrows Bridge, as if an enemy army were about to storm down the off-ramps. The base is still active, and in December I went there to meet Lieutenant Colonel Michael Stinnett, who commands New York City's Army Recruiting Battalion. An agreeable ex-Californian with a silvery buzz cut, he oversees twenty recruiting centers, pushing each one to meet a quota of eight to ten enlistments per month.

At first that struck me as a modest target—only 2,400 recruits per year from the nation's largest city. But as Stinnett readily acknowledged, the Army itself is shrinking: from 570,000 soldiers in 2006, during the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to 558,000 in 2012. By 2017, that number is supposed to drop to 490,000.

I asked Stinnett whether he was worried that, as the economy makes at least a wobbly recovery, recruiters will have a harder time scraping up suitable candidates. "It's not so much the economy," he said, "but getting qualified applicants who have graduated high school and have no crimes or other problems on their records. And obesity! *Those* are our challenges." He conceded that standards had dropped six or seven years ago, when the Army began admitting an alarming number of recruits on what are called moral, medical, and criminal waivers. With the AVF under tremendous pressure, convictions for manslaughter, vehicular homicide, robbery, assault, and statutory rape were no longer the disqualifying events they once had been. "We took everybody," Stinnett said. Facing media scrutiny, the Army cut back drastically on misconduct waivers, discouraging what had become a steady trickle of felons.

Is the pared-down fighting force a response to modern warfare, which favors agility and technological prowess over massed medieval armies on the battlefield, or is it simply the result of a budgetary squeeze? Stinnett's tactful answer: "Both." And would conscription lead to a better fighting force? The AVF is better, was Stinnett's conclusion, as long as the geopolitical situation remains stable and the volunteers keep volunteering.

Which they do, even in today's slightly less enfeebled economy. To demonstrate, Stinnett ushered me into a compact car with a camouflage-clad sergeant at the wheel, and we drove to the recruiting center on East 149th Street in the South Bronx. The neighboring stores—Dental Plaza, Best Beauty, Spike's Discounts—were doing plenty of business, but so was the Army.

There were recruits lined up inside and ARMY STRONG pamphlets scattered about. The desk where I sat had a scale model of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle parked atop a hardcover copy of General Hugh Shelton's *Without Hesitation: The Odyssey of an American Warrior.* On one wall was a large poster for Call of Duty: Ghosts, the latest installment of a first-person-shooter saga that must have steered more enlistees into the armed forces than any government ad campaign.

While Stinnett conferred with his recruiting sergeants, I spoke to a suc-

cession of aspiring soldiers. They were male and female, black and white and Latino—one had arrived from Ghana just a few weeks earlier. Of course the rich are still largely absent, and women form only 15 percent of the total force, but on the most basic level the AVF reflects the demography of the nation. (As Bacevich put it: "The Michael Moore argument, which says that the dregs of society are somehow shanghaied into joining the Marine Corps, is bullshit.")

Almost all the recruits I met viewed the military as an economic opportunity: they were already pondering post-Army careers as doctors, police officers, and mechanical engineers. What impressed me, though, was the persistent patriotism on display. "I want to wear the uniform," Alexis Frank told me, fiddling with a gold earring in the shape of a crucifix. "This is not a perfect country," said Jerry Mansfield IV, whose previous attempt at service was interrupted when he returned home after his initial training and was shot in the stomach during an altercation in the street. "But this is what I know, this is what I love, and it don't get no better." They weren't cynical, and they weren't concerned about whatever foreign-policy machinations might send them overseas to kill similarly earnest recruits on the other side. They were there to serve, in sufficient numbers for a modern military force, and the decision to do so was their own.

Representative Rangel has been at this a long time. On January 7, 2003, as it was becoming clear we would go to war, he introduced the Universal National Service Act (H.R. 163), which proposed to "provide for the common defense by requiring that all young persons in the United States, including women, perform a period of military service or a period of civilian service in furtherance of the national defense and homeland security." The bill was bottled up in committee for nearly two years, then brought to the floor in October 2004, where it was trounced by a vote of 402–2. Even Rangel himself voted against it—protesting, he says, the way H.R. 163 was shoved directly onto the floor without any provision for debate.[2]

Yet he didn't surrender. Rangel followed up last year with a nearly identical bill, H.R. 748, which has now been dropped into the black hole of the Subcommittee on Military Personnel. When he discusses the issue, as he did with me during a lively telephonic monologue shortly after the New Year, he touches effortlessly on nearly every argument for the draft. "I want to show that everybody has some skin in this game," he told me, "and that we're not just talking about other people's kids in Congress, we're talking about our own families." There's the social-cohesion angle: "I am saying that *everyone* should have to make a commitment to national service." There is the hope that a cunningly crafted bill will hobble executive overreach by triggering an automatic draft every time the president even contemplates going to war. Rangel also suggested that the military was less enamored of the AVF than they were willing to let on, a clairvoyant assessment I hadn't heard from other fans of conscription.

Like the others, though, Rangel seemed resigned to the fact that the draft is a nonstarter in any practical sense. He even described H.R. 748 as a "sleeper bill"—something that might emerge from legislative limbo in the event of a really, really big crisis. But if that's the idea, why not propose a more narrowly focused bill to address just such a military emergency? And if you want to repair the American social fabric by means of peacetime national service, why not fashion a freestanding, mandatory domestic Peace Corps rather than bolting it onto the bugaboo of conscription? Finally, if you want to improve the quality of Congress, there's a quicker, saner way to achieve that without hustling a multitude of unwilling soldiers into uniform. Just vote the current bunch out of office. ■

[2] *The two votes in favor were cast by the Pennsylvania Democrat John Murtha, who in Rangel's words was "pissed off" by the procedural trickery, and by the California Democrat Pete Stark, the only avowed atheist in Congress at the time and so staunch a pacifist that he had peace symbols printed on all the checks issued by the bank he owned.*